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Theatre of Neil Simon and Aesthetics of Mass Entertainment

Monika Dhillon

Research Scholar,

Department of English and Cultural Studies

Panjab University, Chandigarh

Abstract:

Neil Simon employs his theatre to provide a sense of comfort, fulfillment, and approval to replace insecurity, fear of abandonment, and the futility of loss. He depicts characters grappling to handle their feelings in difficult situations, and releasing tension with humour. He uses laughter as a form of coping mechanism. His aim is to purge the audience of the hardships of practical existence. His fans nicknamed him 'doc' because he relieves pain through laughter just as a doctor relieves pain through medicine. In his use of popular theatrical techniques like vaudeville, jokes and farce, Simon is greatly influenced by the American comic tradition. American theatre has its roots in popular rather than elitist art forms. Theatre of Neil Simon acts as a cultural matrix where popular American television comedy and lowbrow vaudevillian Jewish humour forge new combinations. The present paper will discuss the comic vision of Neil Simon, who, through a dynamic combination of commercial and critical approach imparts a new cultural meaning to the American comic theatre and mass entertainment forms throughout the world.

Keywords: Neil Simon, Mass Entertainment, Humour, American Comic Tradition, Vaudeville, Jewish Humour, Elitist Art Forms.

Introduction:

One of America's favorite playwrights, Neil Simon relieves audiences of their anxieties, fears, and worries by making them laugh at their own foibles. His tragicomic plays expose human frailties and make people laugh at themselves. A prolific writer, he has written and had produced more Broadway hits than any other American playwright. His contribution to the arts and to popular culture in the twentieth century was recognized in 1995 when he received Kennedy Centre Honours from President Bill Clinton. Through his portrayals of individual angst and dysfunctional family relationships he takes the audience through laughter to tears and back, as he explores life's emotional truths. In his plays, he shares his life experiences, including boyhood fantasies of escape from the emotional turmoil of his family, and the frustration and despair of coping with his wife's terminal illness. In a 1996 interview with Randy Gener for American Theatre, Simon commented, "I was writing plays that made people laugh. I wanted a response from the audience that would make up for whatever it was that was missing from those formative years of mine." (qtd. in Encyclopedia par. 8) For him, laughter provides a sense of comfort, fulfillment, and approval to replace insecurity, fear of abandonment, and later the

futility of loss. Simon depicts characters grappling to handle their feelings in difficult situations, and releasing tension with humour. The present chapter will discuss the comic vision of Neil Simon, who, through a dynamic combination of commercial and critical approach imparts a new cultural meaning to the American comic theatre. He uses laughter as a form of coping mechanism. His aim is to purge the audience of the hardships of practical existence. His fans nicknamed him 'doc' because he relieves pain through laughter just as a doctor relieves pain through medicine. In his childhood, he got relief from his unhappiness by going to the movies of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and Laurel. Simon once told an interviewer: "I was constantly being dragged out of movies for laughing too loud. So my first goal as a playwright was to make a whole audience fall into the floor, writhing and laughing so hard that some of them pass out"(qtd. in Satpathy 16). He employs low comedy; jokes and clownish physical activity to portray the fruitlessness of human expectations and to give critical comments on the condition of modern man. His comedies evoke tearful laughter and he approaches intellect through emotions. His characters evoke laughter from the audience which is simultaneously derisive and sympathetic. Sometimes tears roll down the eyes of the spectators and sometimes they feel detached.

Discussion:

In his use of popular theatrical techniques like vaudeville, jokes and farce, Simon is greatly influenced by the American comic tradition. American theatre has its roots in popular rather than elitist art forms. Its origins and evolution prior to the twentieth century were largely entertainment based, and Simon with his phenomenal success from both commercial and critical points of view has reached a wide audience through his numerous domestic comedies, musicals and screenplays. To have a thorough grasp of his comic vision, let us have a look on the American tradition of comedy of which he becomes an indispensable part.

Early American comic plays were slavish imitation of European models, especially English models. Historically, American comedy began with Royall Tyler's *The Contrast* (1787). It includes prototypes in the form of an old fashioned melodrama, heavily loaded with scheming villains and pursued young maidens, plus a noble stage Yankee, Jonathan. Alan Downer suggests that he is a stereotype, a fore runner of a hundred vaudeville and radio commentators who specialize in racial caricatures (Fifty Years 114). When one talks about the originality of American theatre, one important question that arises is how original are the later American plays as compared to the early plays which were branded as imitations? Referring to Broadway theatre, Thomas Hirschak notes that while the established stage that dominated the Broadway stages in 1869 was American, most of the plays were foreign or European adaptations. British and French plays were the norm; American theatre was really European theatre with American actors. But one still has to ask how American is the American theatre? (Epilogue). A suitable answer to this question is provided by the comedy critic Eric Bentley:

The American theatre is commercial to such an extent that any writer with a modicum of Shaw's subtlety and seriousness would have turned to novel to express himself. Serious American playwrights were generally second rate Europeans whereas the American contribution lay in the so called lighter plays and musical comedy. (qtd. in Downer *The American* 55)

To get a glimpse of the American comic tradition it is not enough to study the history of American comedy, one has to study the roots of entertainment forms in America, as discussed earlier, their evolution and expansion is deeply rooted inside the American working class spirit. As no theatre form is divorced from the culture in which it flourished, the native popular tradition of American theatre is rooted inside the American working class spirit. Alan Lewis writes that in France theatres are classified and light entertainment is generously supplied by a professional corps of 'boulevard' writers. In New York, plays of all descriptions are tossed into the same stage and evaluated by the same standards. The American 'boulevard writer' has no separate area to operate (165). The roots of the American entertainment theatre are in popular mass cultural forms like the minstrel shows, the vaudeville, radio and sitcoms of the 1940s and 1950s. All these forms give rise to the present musical theatre.

Minstrel show was an American form of entertainment consisting of comic skits, variety acts, dancing and music performances by white people in black face or especially after the civil war, black people in black face. Despite reinforcing racist stereotypes, black face minstrelsy was a practice which provided relatively lucrative livelihood when compared to the menial labourhood to which blacks were relegated. In the 1830s and 1840s, it was at the core of the rise of American music industry. In the 1930s, minstrel shows were replaced by more sophisticated theatrical forms like the vaudeville.

The term Vaudeville in America is used to indicate an entertainment consisting of short, variegated acts, some musical, some comic, all offered on the same place. Martin Laforce notes:

Vaudeville reflected the American experience of its time very broadly, including racial and religious stereotypes, low comedy, sensationalist advertising, ruthless competition, faddism, censorship, classical and oriental architecture, innocent charm, itinerant actors, skill in performance, and huge organizations (99).

The tradition of vaudeville and minstrel shows is continued by the television comedy in America. Popular theatre and the media, especially the entertainment media, are inseparable. Traditionally, comic sketches were presented within a variety show and mixed with musical performances in vaudeville. The emerging medium of radio and television allows the audience to regularly view programmes every week. The most dominant genre among television comedy is sitcom. It originated in radio but today it is the dominant narrative form on television. It is different from standup comedy because comic portions in sitcom are enclosed in a narrative.

Neil Simon has spent more than a decade in television, pioneering among other things, the genre of situation comedy. He has more plays adapted to film and helped to define television comedy during the medium's legendary days. He started his career with writing jokes for newspaper columns and comedy for radio show Robert Q Lewis Show. Settled on the West Coast to pursue his goal of becoming a director, Simon became an outstanding member of the legendary team of writers devising material for the most famous television comedy weekly of its time, NBC's *Your Show of Shows*, starring Sid Caesar and for *Sergeant Bilko*, starring Phil Silvers, in 1959. The show was historically significant. By incorporating sitcom, it added narrative to the traditional multi-act structure. He, along with his brother Danny Simon, created comic sketches for a Broadway show *New Faces of 1956*. He also worked for Jerry Lewis and Jackie Gleason and wrote for *Tallulah Bankhead Show* and *Red Buttons Show*. He talks about his early work in radio and television:

It was a very good education for me because we were updating pretty famous musical books of the past. We would throw the book out completely and use the score; we would sort of follow the story line but use our own dialogue. So I was able to step in the footprints of previous writers and learn about the construction from them. (qtd. in Bryer par.10)

Most of his plays are Broadway hits. Broadway paid tribute to him in 1983 by renaming the Alvin Theatre, the Neil Simon Theatre. Because Simon initially learnt his craft of laughter during the golden age of television comedy, he came to the theatre with a gift for writing gags and one-liners and an instinctive knowledge of what would make audience laugh. His plays provide laughs, thrills and escape from boredom. The turning point in his career occurred when he accepted a five week assignment for a Jerry Lewis's Show. He finished the project ahead of time, and then started the first draft of *Come Blow Your Horn*. His plays reflect a biographical tinge. The play is about a patriarchal family where father is the head of the family. The special feature of his plays is that he always takes family as a unit. His plays revolve around middle-class families. There is involvement of the audience, as people of the same status are more in number, which makes them one of the characters of the play.

Although he has written about population explosion, drug addiction, corruption, anti-Semitism and alcoholism, he prefers to live within the sphere of family and human relationships. In his treatment of human relationships, he employs flexibility and believes in the importance of family as the basic social unit. In the process of assertion of family as the stable unit of society, Simon does not romanticize middle-class values. Through his theatrical art he attempts to create a dialogue between the traditional past and the experimental present. His plays invariably depict the plight of white middle-class Americans, most of whom are New Yorkers and many of whom are Jewish like him. John Lahr notes that he does not think against society, he thinks with it, observing and recognizing the sorrows and deliriums of the middle-class. Humour in his plays is not a weapon but a wink, recognition of how absurdly we live our lives. He told *The Paris*

Review in 1992: “I don’t write social and political plays, because I’ve always thought the family was the microcosm of what goes on in the world. I write about the small wars that eventually become big wars” (qtd. in Lahr, par.3). His drama is a contest with the feelings of an audience as to whether these are to be preserved or destroyed. His plays make us feel, think and comment, and then revise our feelings and comments on our commentary. We analyze and reanalyze the logic of our thought and feeling until we can neither think nor feel, not even laugh (Satpathy 174).

Susan Koprince argues that in domestic comedies, Simon’s style can be traced back to Menander, the master of Greek New Comedy. Credited with writing one hundred plays, Menander helped to replace the Old Comedy of Aristophanes with a more realistic comedy of manners. He refined the use of stock characters, blended humorous and tragic themes, and focused his comedies on domestic life rather than the public arena. The plots of most comedies of Simon follow a basic storyline derived from Menander (3). According to M.H Abrams, Neil Simon revives the comedy of manners in the twentieth century along with Alan Ayckbourn, Noel Coward and Wendy Wasserstein (39). His characters are often tempted to break their wedding vows or to separate because of marital difficulties, but in the end they manage to reaffirm their mutual commitments. His comedies typically conclude not with the celebration of a new marriage but with the renewal of an old one. (Koprince 3). In his treatment of everyday issues of domestic life, Simon depicts a way of life in which suburban middle-class characters express their spiritual distress and neurosis through one-liner quips. Randy Gener notes:

Humiliated, beleaguered, tired and confused, they are endemically trapped in dead end situations in which comedy issues from their anxious flailings in search of love, sex, security and happiness; and bitterness comes from their ultimate acquiescence and surrender to futility and despair. Simon’s bankable shtick exaggerates angst and panic for laughs. The melancholic shrug in the face of absurdity is the emblem of his artful comic philosophy (par.8)

Protagonists in the comedies of Simon are existential heroes. They remain unsatisfied in every situation and are alien to themselves. He uses farce to reveal to his audiences, how absurdly they live their lives. His talent lies in the handling of painful comedy. He employs black humour and low comedy to exhibit pain through the mask of comedy. In his use of black humour, Simon is greatly indebted to Chekhov. Like Chekhovian characters, the emotional reactions of his characters find expression in comic physical behaviour. They are pitiful and cannot fight against the odds that engulf them. His farces exaggerate the behaviour of his characters by over drawing their foibles. “In rejecting the traditional structure of interest and excitement in his plays, Chekhov set himself the task of presenting mediocrity, futility and boredom to his audience without boring them and making a broad general statement without losing the particularity needed to make sharp and realistic impact” (Satpathy 9). Like Chekhov, Simon focuses more on his characters rather than the plot. Instead of strong plot and striking events, Simon places weight

on character's motive from the start. His comic art lies in juxtaposing individual attitudes in order to reveal an incongruous situation in its entirety.

In the plays of Simon, audience feels detached and sympathetic at the same time. He attains artistic maturity when, in a moment, he oscillates his scenes between tears and laughter. Influenced by Pirandello, he treats humour as an exquisite coition of laughter and grief. Pirandello recognizes that man may hold within himself at the same time the power to mock and the power to sympathize. Swayam Satpathy notes that he intends to show man, the contradictions within life and within himself. But he attempts to transmit to the spectator his own obsessed interest in man's erratic and inconsistent mind, with its capricious motives and behaviours. In a state of near hysteria, man will break into painful laughter, and the two impulses of ridicule and pathos will come together in a completely felt, but pessimistic image of human condition (11). Simon uses this ambivalent attitude in his plays when he artistically mixes laughter, mockery and farce with abundant sympathy for the foibles of his characters. His beautifully crafted farce results in tearful laughter.

Simon's approach towards middle-class values and his interest in the everyday human behaviour is similar to his contemporary English playwright Alan Ayckbourn. Like Ayckbourn, he uses humour to portray the lifestyle of suburban middle-class. His plays may seem to lead into despair but he employs laughter as a substitute for hard truths of certain relationships that may have a chance of survival. He uses humour and laughter as a form of defense mechanism. The central pull in his comedies is certainly towards laughter. Comparing his comic talent with Bernard Shaw, Swayam Satpathy argues:

Laughter at the pain of others is an intellectual affair for dramatists like Shaw. But in the case of Simon, laughter at the underlying incongruity results out of his great compassion for human beings, which precludes his soliciting laughter in direct proportion to the hurt suffered by his characters. (148)

Ethnically, Simon's humour is Jewish, though not in the sense of dialect or in jokes. He is the master of the self-protective self deprecating put down where one makes a clown of oneself before anyone else does (Konas 59). Traditional Jewish humour often converts a joke into a form of social comment or criticism. However, the humour of the Jews is not only a weapon with which they subtly strike back at a bullying world. A great deal of their laughter is directed at themselves. Self criticism is one of the earmarks of Jewish comedy¹. Theatre of Neil Simon acts

¹ In his book *The Haunted Smile: The Story of Jewish Comedians in America*, Lawrence Epstein notes that beginning with vaudeville, and continuing through radio, stand-up comedy, film, and television, a disproportionately high percentage of American, German, and Russian comedians have been Jewish (n.pag). Jewish humour, while diverse, favours wordplay, irony, and satire, and its themes are highly anti-authoritarian, mocking religious and secular life alike (*Encyclopedia* 552).

as a cultural matrix where popular American television comedy and lowbrow vaudevillian Jewish humour forge new combinations.

After the commercial and critical success of *Lost in Yonkers* and the Brighton Beach trilogy, scholars have begun to pay serious attention to Simon. The first play of the trilogy, *Brighton Beach Memoirs* (1983), is both critically acclaimed and the highest profit making play in the history of New York Theatre. With the recent blurring of distinctions between elitist art forms and popular art forms, scholar community has acknowledged that serious comments about life and society can be given without sacrificing the mass appeal. Michael Kammen says in his study of popular culture in America:

The history of cultural taste in the twentieth century has been one of the fluidity, blending, and the attendant blurring of boundaries, then Simon's enduring relationship with audiences suggests how attentive he has had to all the modulations of response that such movement implies. (qtd. in Mandl 79)

He experiments with the traditional definition of theatre and an artist within the boundaries set by the popular taste. Critics, who underestimate his work due to his commercial success, must analyze his new role which he envisioned for himself, retaining his distinctive comic voice while treating serious matters in a way that a wide audience increasingly appreciates. There is something frank and naive in Simon's admission of his commercial success. "He regularly shares his own perceptions of where he should be located in the history of theatre, making self-assessments that are simultaneously prods to ways of seeing his work. He also compares himself with Hemingway, employing 'Simonesque' humour to make the contrast vivid" (Mandl 87). He describes what he calls:

A vast difference between Hemingway and me, which any voting member of the Noble Prize committee could tell you. He had a life. I had a career. I envied his life, but I would have been ill-suited to live it. I would never shoot a lion; I'd get no kick out of bringing down a tiger; an antelope's head on my wall wouldn't thrill me at all; and I'm sure I'd get sick at a bullfight as well (qtd. in Mandl 87).

Bette Mandl asserts that Simon strives towards the creation of a new aesthetic, and even a new corollary ethic. He dares to question the tenet, as Hemingway put it, "The writing of a book should destroy the writer". He makes room in American literature for the kind of artist he is, by revisioning what an artist can be (88). Thus, through his attempt to reformulate the role of art and an artist, he becomes an indispensable member of the American comic tradition which has its unique contribution towards the evolvment, perfection and appraisal of mass entertainment forms throughout the world.

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